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Adult education on LAUSD chopping block

By Barbara Jones, Staff Writer

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Students look on as Aldo Robles discusses an engine component during an engine performance class at the West Valley Occupational Center in Woodland Hills on Feb. 8, 2012. Funding to the center may be reduced due to state budget cuts. (Andy Holzman/Daily News Staff Photographer)

Call it a school for second chances.

High-school dropouts can go there to earn a GED or diploma. Veterans, laid-off workers and young adults with vocational aspirations can learn a trade. Immigrant parents can acquire basic English and math skills so they can help their kids with homework.

At nearly three dozen adult education and occupational centers operated by the Los Angeles Unified School District, nearly 300,000 students are enrolled in low-cost programs designed to help them better their lives.

Their fate now lies in the hands of the school board, which is set to vote Tuesday on a budget

that would cut the program and divert most of the \$200 million in state money earmarked for adult education to ease the district's \$557 million deficit.

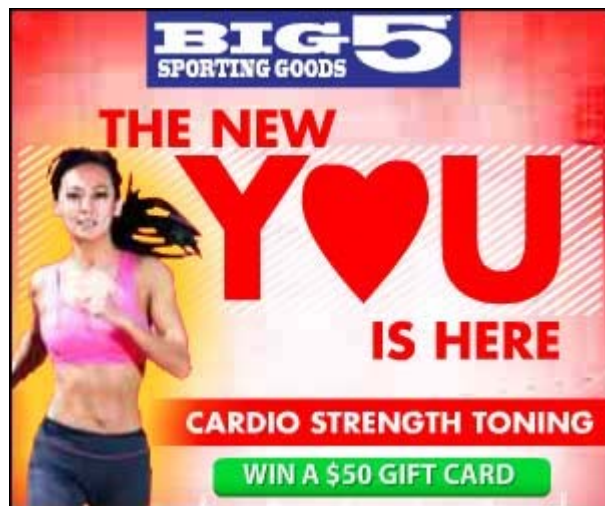
While LAUSD leaders say they desperately need the money to fund core programs at K-12 campuses, adult education advocates say the program is essential to building an academic support system for LAUSD parents and training a skilled workforce for Southern California.

"Los Angeles Unified is the perfect storm," said Chris Nelson, president of the 3,000-member California Council for Adult Education. "Ending all services for 300,000 students will have a huge impact -- not only on the students, but on the community."

There is no easy solution to the quandary facing the school district, which is wrestling with how to balance the \$6 billion budget for 2012-13.

For the last five

years, the cash-strapped state government has provided the district with just part of the money it is supposed to receive and has extended IOUs for the rest. This year, for instance, Los Angeles Unified got just \$3,338 of the \$6,506 it had been promised to educate each student, according to



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district officials.

Los Angeles Unified, meanwhile, must fulfill its labor contracts -- roughly 90 percent of its costs are personnel-related -- while coping with the expiration of state and federal



Students look on as Mike McLouth repairs a dent in an autobody class at the West Valley Occupational Center in Woodland Hills, CA February 8, 2012. (Andy Holzman / Staff Photographer)

grants and stimulus money. Lower birthrates and the exodus to charter schools has reduced district enrollment, resulting in less state funding and making it more difficult to serve the remaining students.

That's why, Superintendent John Deasy says, he needs the money from adult education to pay for K-12 operations.

"There's not a single thing, not a single program that I want to cut," Deasy said. "But that doesn't mean I'm not going to have to cut them."

The budget he is asking the school board to approve Tuesday includes a worst-case scenario that would slash about \$178 million from the adult ed program, leaving \$13 million to support "high school graduation-related services."

The plan also would eliminate the district's \$18.6 million elementary arts program, lay off

librarians and library aides, and increase class sizes across the board.

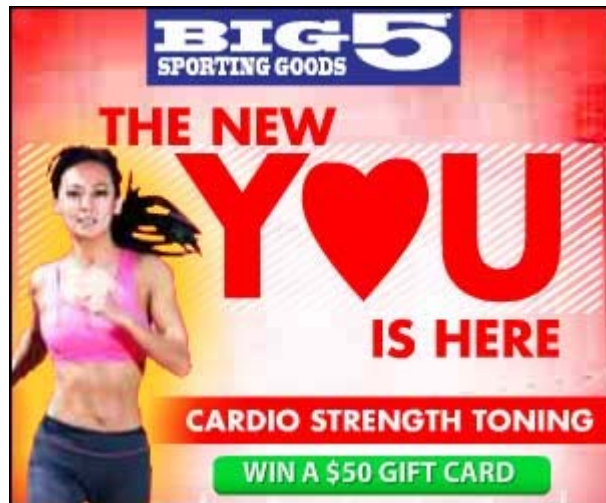
Deasy also plans to ask the school board to authorize putting a \$300-a-year parcel tax on the November ballot.

Even if the parcel tax and a sales-tax hike proposed by Gov. Jerry Brown pass, officials say, the district would need money from another tax measure -- or from employee layoffs -- to salvage these programs.

And if one or more of the initiatives fail, the district will have to cut nearly \$363 million to erase the shortfall.

"It's a dysfunctional situation, and LAUSD has to do what it can with the cards it's dealt," said Ernest Kettenring, director of adult education

for United Teachers Los Angeles. "But we don't think that eliminating adult ed is the answer."



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Lizeth Guevara curls Daisy Guerra's hair in the Cosmetology department at the West Valley Occupational Center in Woodland Hills, CA February 8, 2012. (Andy Holzman / Staff Photographer)

Instead, the teachers union advocates scaling back the adult ed program, and trimming its administrative staff.

"We're willing to take cuts, too," Kettenring said, "but they should be proportional cuts instead of just doing away with the programs."

Classrooms, workshops packed

At 9 a.m. on a recent weekday morning, every parking space at the 20-acre West Valley Occupational Center in Woodland Hills was filled.

Classrooms and workshops were packed with students training to become chefs and pharmacy technicians, graphic artists and construction workers. In the automotive center, veteran instructor Aldo Robles was teaching aspiring mechanics to check engine sensors while Mike McLouth demonstrated how to fix a dented fender.

In a crowded computer-networking class, laid-off insurance inspector Sheldon Ochitill was among the students who hope to land well-paying jobs with the skills they're learning.

"I've looked for work, but got more turndowns

than a bedsheet so I came back to school," said Ochitill, of Chatsworth. "I've been paying taxes for years, and figured I'd get a return on my investment that would help me be productive."

In the cosmetology salon, student Cantrell Mitchell practiced his flat-iron technique on classmate Rose Arredondo, a credentialed math teacher who's pursuing a new career that will let her spend more time with her young daughters. Mitchell hasn't even graduated yet, but he's already won gold medals at hairdressing competitions, thanks to the skills he's developing at West Valley.

"This is a fabulous program with fabulous people," said Mitchell, who came from Chicago to become a filmmaker and now finds himself training to be a hair and makeup artist instead.

Nineteen-year-old Melissa Perez just started the cosmetology program last week -- the culmination of a dream she's had since she was 13. Her first day in class, she heard that the program might end this spring, leaving her to wonder how she'll finish the two semesters she needs for her certificate.

"I'm heartbroken," said Perez, who worked two jobs to earn the money for her tuition and supplies. "I can't afford a private school. I guess



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I'll have to try to find another adult school in another district."

West Valley Principal Veronica Montes boasts that her campus -- like the five other occupational centers in Los Angeles Unified -- offers low-cost classes from credentialed teachers at a state-accredited school. The registration fee ranges from \$20 to \$30, and tuition is no more than \$125 per class.

Even with materials fees, students in cosmetology, culinary and pharmacy-tech programs pay about \$1,200 for a certificate that would cost them \$15,000 or \$20,000 at a for-profit college. The two-year aviation mechanics program at North Valley Occupational Center in Mission Hills would cost about \$35,000 at a private school.

Administrators worry that students with vocational rather than college aspirations will have no viable options if occupational centers are closed.

"Where are all these students going to go?" Montes asked. "We're not just talking closing centers, we're talking about social injustice. Because that's what it is if we're eliminating education for those who need it.

"People are asking, how can we continue adult ed? I want to know, how can we not?"

Stories of determination

Kathrin Middleton of dropped out of high school more than 30 years ago to help raise her siblings. She kept her lack of education a secret until her own daughter entered kindergarten -- a milestone that prompted the Encino homemaker to enroll in a diploma program at Rinaldi Adult Center in Granada Hills.

"I was living life in a box, a life filled with shame and limited by fear," Middleton said. "I didn't want that for my daughter. I wanted her to be

brave and courageous, so I faced my demons."

A dropout from Granada Hills Charter, Ashley Mu oz thought she'd closed the door on her future until a friend encouraged her to get her high-school equivalency certificate at Rinaldi.

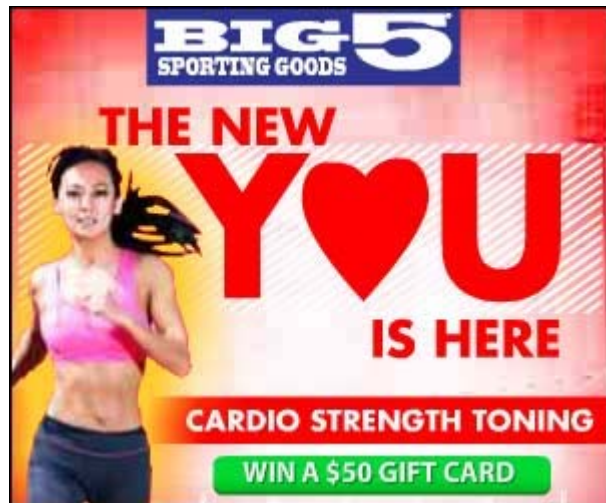
"It gave me a second chance," Mu oz said. "I've got my confidence back and I'm ready to face the world."

There are countless success stories like these among the 10,500 students at Rinaldi, a satellite of the Kennedy-San Fernando Community Adult School.

Principal Kathy Javaheri said there's a misperception that adult centers teach nonessential subjects like handicrafts or foreign language for travelers.

In reality, they're designed to help students earning their GED or high school diploma, which helps LAUSD fulfill its goal of boosting its graduation rate. There are also basic English and math classes for parents of K-12 students so they can acquire the skills to help with homework and participate in their children's education.

"We're part of the fabric of LAUSD," said Javaheri,



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who has been with the adult ed program for more than 30 years. "Taking away adult ed would be tearing away that fabric."

At Rinaldi, Dawn Wilson runs the computer lab outfitted with high-end Apple computers purchased with a \$60,000 grant secured by Javaheri.

Across the way is Georgia George, who has taught early-childhood and parenting classes at Rinaldi for 25 years. While the toddlers and preschoolers learn how to share and socialize, the dozen or so moms and dads share the joys and frustrations of parenting.

At just \$47 a semester, it's a great investment-- especially since the experience isn't one they could get anyplace else.

"We learn about cooking and cleaning and getting organized," said Carol Telimi, who brings her son Arlen to the class. "Now they just want to end it. Try explaining that to a 4-year-old."

Greg Dobie started his adult ed career as a volunteer back in 1988, and was immediately hooked by the enthusiasm and energy of his students. The same desire to learn is instilled in every student in his ESL classes at Van Nuys Adult School, and he worries where they'll find comparable resources if the adult ed program is eliminated.

"There's the argument that students can go to other programs -- community colleges, private colleges. A lot of these students have just six years of education in their native country, and they're not ready for community college. There's no way for them to transition to that level."

Support for program

The proposal to eliminate adult ed has prompted a massive outpouring of protest and support around the district.

United Teachers Los Angeles leaders organized Support Adult Ed demonstrations, circulated petitions and created a system that funneled thousands of telephone calls to elected school board members.

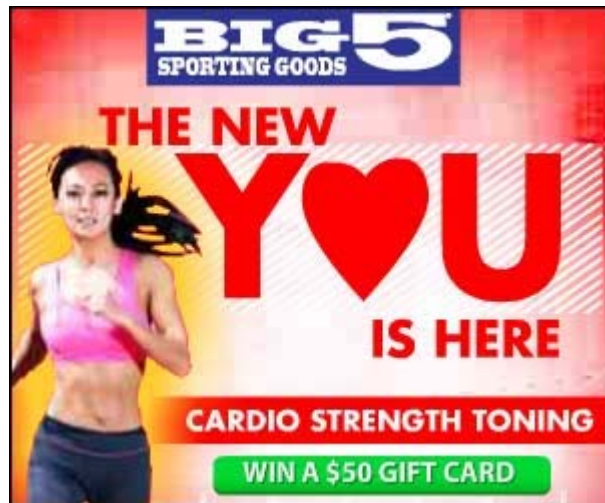
Associated Administrators of Los Angeles says "such an ill-conceived plan should be scrapped to avert a political and educational debacle."

William Johnston, who was district superintendent from 1971-81, sent a letter telling Deasy he has "navigated the good ship LAUSD aground" with his proposal that "fails to meet the basic needs of the greater Los Angeles community."

Congressman Brad Sherman, D-Sherman Oaks, wrote a letter to the board, warning that "any action to eliminate vital adult education programs will only compound the short-term and long-term pain for the district."

Industry groups -- from the Van Nuys Airport Association to the National Air Transportation Association -- are decrying the loss of the district's aircraft mechanics school.

District leaders have said the problem lies with the Legislature, saying it has failed to provide sufficient funding to operate government-



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mandated programs.

Assemblyman Bob Blumenfield, the Van Nuys Democrat who chairs the Assembly Education Committee, refutes that assessment.

"Education is the top priority in our state budget. It is where most of our spending is directed. But, like everything else, it has been cut to help get through this budget crisis brought on by our recession," he said. "We have legally pledged to restore funds that schools have lost when funding is available in the future. No other part of our spending has this protected status and it's because we value education above all things."

Adult classes started in 1887

The roots of Los Angeles Unified's Adult and Career Education Division stretches back to 1887, when the fledgling district began offering English-language and citizenship classes in local churches and community buildings.

Job training courses were gradually added as demand grew for office workers and seamstresses. The economic boom that occurred after World War II prompted a need for more skilled workers -- and more classes -- and the programs gradually made their way onto school campuses.

Like other LAUSD programs, Adult Education was paid for through local taxes until the passage of Proposition 13 in 1978 shifted funding to Sacramento.

The Legislature opted to maintain LAUSD and its Adult Ed Division as two separate programs, with a fiscal firewall separating the two. Money earmarked for Adult Ed and for a couple dozen other "categorical" programs couldn't be spent on other functions.

That protection was eliminated two years ago, as lawmakers struggled to balance the state budget in the midst of the economic recession. They

approved a deal that pushed funding levels back to 2007 levels, and also dismantled the barriers protecting the categorical programs.

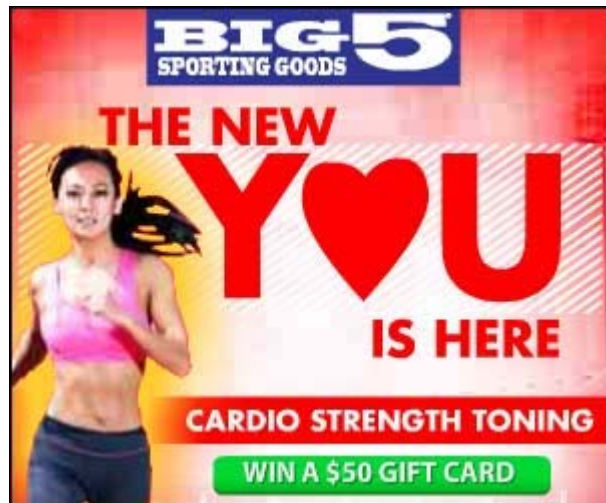
That means that while the Legislature allocated \$165 million for LAUSD's adult-education classes and \$60 million for its occupational centers in 2012-13, the district can divert the money to its general fund to pay for K-12 operations.

Other districts around the state have already raided those funds, scaling back back or eliminating adult education programs. They include Oakland Unified, which dropped from 20,000 students to 1,000, most enrolled in GED and family-literacy classes.

Although Los Angeles Unified is significantly larger than Oakland, the proposed cuts would likely have a comparable impact on the district's population.

Assistant Superintendent Ed Morris, who has been with the adult education program since 1984 and has been its chief for five years, worries about the long-term impact of the reduction.

"About 74 percent of students in LAUSD qualify for free or reduced-price lunches -- they live in poverty.

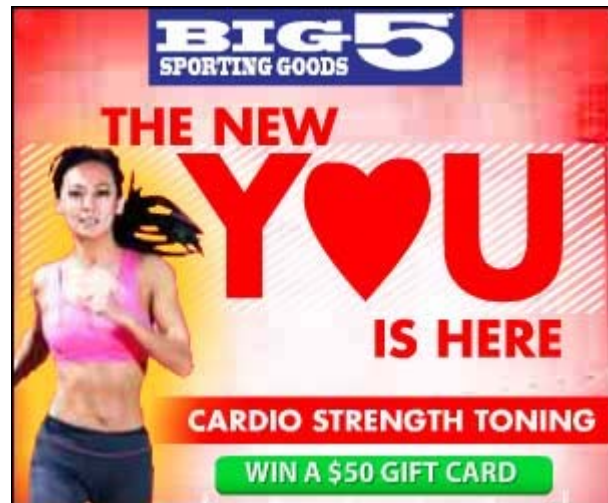


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"These students will live in poverty for every day of every week of every month of every year until we raise the standard of living of their family.

"The kids can't get themselves out of poverty -- it has to be the parent," he said. "And adult education is the best option in terms of helping students, of developing the community, of providing hope for families, and of providing hope for economic development."

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